

## MEDICINE IN PUBLIC VIEW

### Sensational Approach to Lay Stories Decried at Science Writers Meeting

By World Wide Medical News Service

FORT COLLINS, COLO.—Science writers from 15 Rocky Mountain and Plains states were warned here that there is increasing misuse of the "break-through" and "promising discovery" type of medical story in the lay press.

The speaker, one of 35 at a week-long science news writing seminar conducted by Colorado State University, was Dr. H. Jack Geiger, postdoctoral research fellow at Harvard Medical School and a science editor for a national feature service.

Dr. Geiger discussed several dangers in the "break-through" type of story:

- False hopes are raised in connection with diseases in which no actual breakthroughs have been made, for example, acute leukemia, and heart disease.
- If misuse of the word continues, "people are going to get tired of it," and when true advances are made, they will doubt them.
- The public will get the mistaken idea that "this is what scientific research is

for—to make break-throughs," when actually most basic research is done simply for its own sake and to advance understanding.

In connection with the first point, Dr. Geiger told the 22 writers here that before he became a physician he wrote a number of "break-through" type stories.

Later, as a physician, when he found how hard it was to inform patients and families that no break-through existed, such as in acute leukemia, he decided that too often writers use the expression "in attempt to make a story interesting." Dr. Geiger was science editor for International News Service before going to medical school.

He outlined two other problems in lay science writing:

- Too little checking of the accuracy and validity of statistics contained in scientific papers and reports.
- A tendency to accept news releases and papers in scientific journals without enough aggressive questioning.



DR. H. JACK GEIGER

Arthur Snider, science editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, cautioned reporters to guard against "overenthusiasm of scientists reporting discoveries."

He noted that "most discoveries fall by the wayside."

In commenting on the difficulty in writing science news for the lay press, he said that it is hard to "conceptualize abstrac-

tions, and abstractions make up science in large part."

He also said it is sometimes necessary for a writer in presenting a science story to the lay public to compromise between "incomprehensible accuracy and comprehensible inaccuracy."

Gene Lindberg, science editor of the *Denver Post*, another panelist, said he directed his stories toward "the nonexpert" and tried to write them so that the nonexpert could understand them.

In a panel discussion of biologic research, Dr. Verne L. Van Breeman, director of research at Mercy Institute for Biomedical Research in Denver, argued that if technical terms are used often enough, the lay reader will soon pick them up and understand them.

Theodore T. Puck, Ph.D., Professor and head of the Department of Biophysics at the University of Colorado Medical School, said the "biggest fault" in lay science writing is "the failure to connect up new discoveries with the main fabric of our body of knowledge."

He maintained that more background should be given in articles for the lay public to show how a current finding fits in with previous work.

He said that additional faults of present science coverage are: Too little space in the news devoted to science and medicine compared with sports; "Emphasis on the lurid and spectacular" in science stories; Failure of reporters to check their articles with authorities for accuracy.

In an informal discussion among the writers about scientists, several said that physicians were the most difficult to cope with.

One writer attributed the trouble to "doctors' having a messiah complex."

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